

Obituary Notice of JOHN C. CRESSON.

BY FREDERICK FRALEY.

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John Chapman Cresson, late Senior Vice-President of the American Philosophical Society, was born in the City of Philadelphia, on the 16th day of March, A. D. 1806. He was the eldest son of Joseph Cresson and Mercy Chapman.

His paternal ancestor was Solomon Cresson, who came from France to America in the latter part of the 17th century. On the mother's side, he was descended from John Chapman, who came to Pennsylvania in 1684, among the first settlers of the Province, and who was one of the principal Surveyors for William Penn. On both sides the family were distinguished members of the Society of Friends, his grandfather, James Cresson, being an esteemed Minister. His grandfather, Dr. John Chapman, was a man of very eminent ability, by profession a Physician, and filled many public stations with honor and fidelity. He was a member of the State Legislature, and also of the House of Representatives of the United States. He was a member of the American Philosophical Society, having been elected February 12, 1768.

After receiving the usual elementary education in

the primary schools, the subject of our notice was placed as a pupil in the Friend's Academy, then under the charge of Thomas Dugdale and Joseph Roberts. These were two of the best instructors of their day, and under their care he secured a thorough classical and mathematical education. He was very early distinguished by the accuracy, extent and diversity of his knowledge, and the training which he received under these eminent men in careful habits of study, and in becoming thoroughly acquainted with what he intended to learn, characterized the whole of his life and gave a remarkable tone to everything he did.

After receiving such an education, his first impulse was to study medicine, and he made the usual preliminary preparations for it that prevailed in those days, and for some months seemed to consider it as his future profession. But while he delighted in the study of its principles, he shrank from the labors and uncertainties of the practice of it, and after very valuable acquisitions in that noble science, he abandoned the study and determined to become an Agriculturist. He, however, cherished an ardent love for medicine, and the members of that profession, who were so fortunate as to enjoy his friendship in after life, have often spoken in high terms of the accuracy and extent of his medical knowledge.

About the time of making this change in his plans for a profession, he became acquainted with the late Wm. H. Keating, who had been recently elected Professor

of Chemistry applied to Agriculture and the useful Arts, in a Department of the University of Pennsylvania, established by the Trustees, to meet what was then a matter of great necessity, and the results of which as we shall see hereafter were very important to the City of Philadelphia. In his attendance upon the lectures and other instruction of Professor Keating, he added greatly to his stock of knowledge, and he was therefore well fitted to begin the study of Agriculture.

He was placed under the charge of the late Isaac Price, of Chester County, and spent over a year in his family and under his instruction, becoming well grounded in all of the details of farming, and doing with his own hands every kind of farm labor. He subsequently entered the family of the late James Worth, of Bucks County, as pupil and friend, and with him completed his education as an Agriculturist. Shortly after attaining his majority, a farm in Cheltenham Township, Montgomery County, was purchased for him by his father, and he prepared to enter on the real business of life. In May, 1827, he married Miss Letitia L. Massey, daughter of Charles Massey, with whom he lived happily for almost fifty years. The issue of this marriage was one son and two daughters; the daughters died in early childhood. The son, Dr. Charles M. Cresson, is still living, and is an esteemed and useful member of our Society. Thus settled on his farm, and ardently attached to Agricultural pursuits, he went to work manfully to make his business a suc-

cess. But in those days farming was far from profitable; produce of all kinds bore low prices, and with all his zeal and industry, and leading his hands in all work, the results gave no profit to represent even a moderate interest on the cost of the farm. After fighting fortune in this way for several years but without immediately abandoning his farm, he entered into partnership with two of his cousins and engaged with them in commercial business. The farm was sold in 1834 and he removed to Philadelphia, and from this time his real and useful history begins.

— He became a member of the Franklin Institute in 1831, and there met a host of ardent men, the founders and builders up of that noble Institution. Prominent among these were Samuel V. Merrick, William H. Keating, Robert M. Patterson, Alexander Dallas Bache, Isaiah Lukens, Benjamin Reeves, Matthias W. Baldwin, Franklin Peale, George Washington Smith, John Wiegand, John F. Frazer, and others equally worthy, with whom he immediately became intimate in his friendship, and bound by a kinship of labor in the attainment and application of useful knowledge. Here he was in a congenial field, his old friend and preceptor, Keating, was in the forefront of the zealous workers of the Institute, and Mr. Cresson soon showed that while engaged actively in farming he had not neglected the text books of Philosophy and Science.

His knowledge of mechanics and chemistry was very comprehensive, and was immediately made available

by placing him on committees charged with the investigation of mechanical and scientific subjects. We have not space to particularize all such labors, but when we say that for more than forty years he was an active member of the Institute, always ready for duty and always earnest in work, some estimate may be formed of this part of his career.

While thus, as it were, entering the threshold of his practical life, the corporate authorities of the City of Philadelphia, in 1835, determined to erect the Gas Works for the supply of the city. This work was carried out by Samuel V. Merrick, Esq., as Engineer, who had prepared himself for it by a visit to Europe, and a personal inspection of the Gas works in operation there. On the completion of the first section of the works and putting them in operation in 1836, Mr. Merrick desired to be relieved from the superintendence and care of the manufacture of Gas, and he was accordingly relieved. It then became an important question for the Trustees of the Works to decide as to whom the management of so important a business should be entrusted. After a patient inquiry and a scrutiny of the claims of other gentlemen, the place of Superintendent was tendered to Mr. Cresson, and being strongly urged by his friends Merrick, Keating, and Bache, to accept it, he yielded to their wishes. Mr. Merrick soon afterwards resigned as Engineer, and Mr. Cresson was then elected to that place as well as the one before held. He occupied these important and highly responsible

positions for twenty-eight years, and the complete success of the Works in their manifold constructions, manufacturing processes, and the safety and extent of the distribution attest his marvelous skill and ingenuity. In the manufacturing department he was eminently successful, and the profits as well as the usefulness of the Works have become proverbial. While engrossed in such labors the Professorship of Mechanics and Natural Philosophy became vacant in the Franklin Institute, and in 1837, Mr. Cresson was unanimously chosen by the Managers to fill it. He accepted the appointment, and in this new field he soon took a high rank among the scientists of the day. His lectures were remarkable in the comprehensive clearness and simplicity of their style, and for the fullness and completeness of their illustrations, and his old students speak of them to this day in the highest terms of praise.

While he was holding this chair, the Controllers of the Public schools of Philadelphia determined to reorganize the City High School, and placed that work in the hands of Professor Alexander Dallas Bache. The plan adopted by him embraced a department of Mechanics and Natural Philosophy, and upon his recommendation Mr. Cresson was elected to the Professorship. He held this office for about two years, discharging its duties with great fidelity and success, but the time taken was found to trench too much on his other engagements, and he resigned it, to the great regret of his associated professors and the students.

Mr. Cresson had by this time won a distinguished reputation in the scientific world, and in appreciation of it, the Trustees of the University of Pennsylvania conferred on him the honorary degree of Master of Arts.

A year or two later, he received from the University of Lewisburg, Pa., the honorary degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

In the year 1855, Samuel V. Merrick, Esq., the chief founder and second President of the Franklin Institute, resigned, and Mr. Cresson was elected almost by acclamation, to succeed him.

The establishment of the Franklin Institute in the year 1824, chiefly through the devotion and personal exertions of Messrs. Merrick and Keating, led to a more thorough appreciation of the dependence of the useful arts on the physical sciences. The Institute was soon a pronounced success. It brought together the best scientists of the City, and the great body of intelligent manufacturers, mechanics, merchants, and professional men, and it thus entered on a career of usefulness which probably has not been excelled anywhere.

On coming to the City, Mr. Cresson entered actively in the work of this body and for upwards of forty years was an active participant in its labors and usefulness. As a member or chairman of important committees, as President, Professor and Counselor, he was always prepared and earnest. His usefulness was manifested

in an eminent degree as Chairman of the Committee on Science, to which place he was elected on the resignation of Professor Bache, in 1844, and the reports and records of that Committee illustrate in their vast fields of inquiry, and the valuable results to inventors, the fertility of his own resources and the wisdom of his selection of the sub-committees charged with the duty of making investigations.

As a philanthropist, Mr. Cresson was equally distinguished. He was for many years a Manager and one of the Vice-Presidents of the Pennsylvania Institution for the Instruction of the Blind, one of the Managers of the Episcopal Hospital, and of the Western Saving Fund Society, and a member of, and contributor to, other charitable institutions. But his services in these respects were specially made available for the Institution for the Blind, for the Saving Fund Society, and for the Episcopal Hospital, his connection with them terminating only at his death, and the management of these great charities expressed their sorrow for his loss, in resolutions that truly declared his merits and services.

In the year 1852, he was elected a Trustee of the University of Pennsylvania, which office he also held at the time of his decease.

In this body he was distinguished, as in all other places, by devotion to the best interests of the institution, heartily co-operating and sometimes leading in the great improvements that have been made in the

methods and extent of the instruction given to the students.

Mr. Cresson served for several years as a Manager of the Schuylkill Navigation Company, while its affairs were under the Presidencies of Solomon W. Roberts, Esq., and Charles Ellet, Jr., Esq., and he gave useful aid in preparing plans and carrying out the great enlargements of the canals and other works of that Company during the years 1845 and 1846.

He was elected President of the Mine Hill and Schuylkill Haven Railroad Company, in the year 1847, which office he held until his death. Under his administration of the affairs of this Company, its trackage and equipments were largely increased, and it became the principal carrier to the canal and railroad trunk lines of the Anthracite Coal trade of Schuylkill and Northumberland Counties.

He was appointed one of the original Commissioners of Fairmount Park, and was a prominent participant in perfecting the organization of that body, and in adopting its preliminary plans for the extension and arrangement of the Park. Having at this time been relieved from some of his other appointments and duties, he found in the work of the Park a renewal of his old affection for rural occupation, and he cheerfully yielded to the call of the Park Commission to become their Chief Engineer. He entered on this field of duty with a zeal and fidelity that soon manifested his power and genius.

His plans for the improvement of the Park were simple but comprehensive. He seized upon the natural features of the land and the presence of its ancient forest trees to lay out roads and pathways, that should traverse attractive and beautiful spaces and present to the eyes of the visitors resting places of a graceful and attractive character.

To him the arrangement and embellishment of the Park was a labor of love, and he still worked for it when unable to leave his house and bed, while suffering from acute disease.

He had the wide area of the Park mapped, as it were, upon his brain, and his directions to his assistants for the prosecution of their work were as clearly given as if he were standing by them in the field. But he yielded at last to the necessity of parting from a work calling for such continual mental labor, and he resigned at the close of the year 1875.

In the year 1839, he was elected a member of the American Philosophical Society, and the proceedings contain many evidences of his success as an original investigator and careful student of science.

He was elected one of its Vice-Presidents in 1857, and by continued re-elections he became the Senior Vice-President, and held that office when death terminated his membership with us.

He visited Europe once on professional business, and twice for medical advice, and during these visits became acquainted with the prominent scientists of

Great Britain and France, and he often spoke of the heartiness with which he had been received by them, and of the special benefits he had derived from his intercourse with them.

We have now briefly sketched the active life and labors of Mr. Cresson, and the results which they brought to him in the way of reputation and honors.

It remains to us now to endeavor to portray him as a man, and to show that with the endowment he had of such goodly gifts, he was equally blest with moral and social virtues, and with physical strength and beauty.

Mr. Cresson had a stature of over six feet in height, his frame was in harmony with it in being large and well-proportioned. His head, although not large, was admirably formed, and his countenance was mild and beautiful, lighted up with eyes brilliant and expressive.

His manners were easy and dignified, receiving every one with affability, kindness and courtesy, but never permitting undue familiarity. He possessed great conversational powers, and his extensive reading and knowledge gave him the command of a vast variety of subjects, which enabled him to become an acceptable associate of old and young, learned or unlearned, and to give exquisite pleasure to all brought into personal contact with him.

He always had strong religious convictions, and his early training, as a born member of the Society of Friends, undoubtedly gave him his robust morality.

He lost his membership in that Society by his marriage with a lady who was not a member, and while he always remained on terms of great intimacy and friendship with his old friends of the good Quaker faith, his mind was awakened to religious principles of a more definite and outwardly expressed form, and he became by baptism and confirmation a full member of the Episcopal Church. In this membership, as in everything else he did, he was ardent, consistent and useful, freely giving of his labor and substance in aid of Church-work, and by personal example giving force and beauty to his Christian life. In his family he was the affectionate and dearly loved son and brother, the kind, indulgent and devoted husband and father, entwined around every heart with the strongest bonds.

He was a man of great moral and physical courage, never fearing to call a fault or a crime by its right name, and never hesitating by personal interposition to endeavor to check or subdue a wrong doer whom he found engaged in work threatening the peace or security of private citizens or of the public. Sustained by these well-balanced virtues, and by his sincere religious principles, and his thorough trust in the goodness and wisdom of God, he went through a life of nearly seventy years, always cheerful, happy and useful, and looking forward to the close with faith and hope quite equal to those of the patriarchs of old.

In his early manhood he had two very severe attacks of illness, both of which brought him to the verge

of the grave, but even then his meek and quiet spirit and his strong trust greatly aided his physicians, and he seemed to be providentially raised for his future work. During the holding of the great Sanitary Fair in Philadelphia, in the year 1864, in the preparation for which and in its management and success, he had borne a great share, the first symptoms of the disease which terminated his life made their appearance.

He, however, speedily recovered from the violence of the first attack, but the disease assumed a chronic form, and went on, year by year, in spite of usual remedies, increasing in its activity, and gradually leading to that prostration which, in 1872, took him to Europe to seek special advice. He returned much invigorated by the treatment and voyage, but in a few months the unfavorable and violent symptoms again returned, and he made a second visit. On this occasion he submitted to several operations of lithotrity, and embarked for home in the hope that he was permanently relieved. He, however, had a painful voyage, and after he reached home he gradually became more and more impaired in health, and was finally confined to his chamber and couch. Here for many months he suffered the most intense pain, which could only be made bearable by the strongest opiates, but in the short intervals of ease he was the same cheerful and ready friend, pouring out the vast stores of his knowledge, philosophizing on the pleasures of nature, the mysteries of life and death, and looking forward with hope,

patience and faith, to the time when all pain and suffering would cease, and his reward for it all would be found in the peace and rest of Heaven. It was during these years of trial and suffering that all the beauties and harmonies of his character shone with marvelous effect. His friends left his chamber greatly wondering what manner of man he was who could bear so much without repining, and they went forth thankful for such an example, and greatly strengthened by it for their own application.

He sank quietly to rest as the sun was setting, on the 27th day of January, 1876, in the 70th year of his age, taking his departure with his eyes resting on the old forest trees of the Woodlands, then stript of foliage and taking their winter rest, but with the consciousness on his part that the coming Spring would awaken them to a resurrection of beauty, and that he also in due time would rise again in a spiritual body, and be made one with his Master, Christ, in glory.

For more than sixty years he was my associate friend and brother. His life was part of my life, we lived and labored together in the same fields, partook of the same cares and trials, and while I pay this loving tribute to his memory I feel that I but speak for all when I say

“None knew him but to love him,
None named him but to praise.”